

SLACKING 102

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photo by Krystina Sulatycki

You've skipped the class ... now how do you pass?

December is upon us, and with it comes blistering cold, Christmas cheer and the culmination of a semester's worth of hard work.

Or the avoidance of aforementioned work. Perhaps you've fallen from the narrow path of studiousness and now find yourself in the ditch of unpreparedness, with only a couple scant weeks to salvage your train-wreck of a semester. What's to be done? You must take up the task that so many near-failures before you have done—you must cram. The first thing you'll have to do is scope out an ideal place to force a semester's worth of knowledge into your brain in only a few days. Whether it's a tried-and-true studyin' ground, or somewhere off the beaten path, every possible location comes with its ups and downs.

Home

An obvious choice. It's easy to find, requires minimal travel time and you don't need to buy anything while you're there. Plus, you've probably got comfortable chairs and an impressive supply of sweet, life-affirming caffeine.

However, after three months of doing your best to avoid all assignments, lectures and anything else that reeks of work, your brain has likely atrophied from a lack of use. Like an old bike that has sat unattended in a field for six years, your mind has rusted, battered by the elements of apathy. You are most likely devoting the majority of your mental resources for essential activities such as breathing and heating Spaghetti-Os in the microwave. As a result, you don't have the cognitive defences to deal with distractions. And your home has distractions aplenty: television, music, video games, playing cards. Hell, when you're knee deep in a chapter on fluid mechanics, sweeping the floor or trying to scrape dried ketchup off the only dish you own becomes mighty tempting.

The Library

A building specifically created to aid in the spread of knowledge seems like a perfect choice for you, the desperate delinquent. Libraries are enforced quiet spaces and you get the solidarity of knowing that the many people sitting around you are probably just as fucked as you are.

But it's very important to pick the right library if you want to avoid those pesky distractions. Your best bet would be to settle yourself in one of the science or medical libraries on campus. A good test is to pick a book at random from off the shelf and flip to any page. Read it, then count the number of words that you don't understand. If it's over 50 per cent of the page, you've found your studying haven. Under no circumstances should you attempt to study in Rutherford or any other library that specializes in social sciences or humanities. Sure,

you might have the best of intentions, but we both know that you'll just end up sifting through books on Victorian art, looking for naughty paintings.

The coffee shop

A familiar environment with a limitless supply of caffeine, many of the shops in the campus area keep very long hours, giving you a steady place to study from dawn until well after the sun has gone down.

Of course, you might find it to be a very difficult place to focus, especially if you have the bad luck of running into someone that you know. Even if you are lucky enough to have no friends to talk to, the average coffee shop isn't going to provide you with a good place to concentrate. A few hours in, your mind will start to wander, and before long you'll be wondering how many mini-muffins you can fit into your mouth at once. Resist this temptation; all you'll end up with is a sore jaw, a plummeting GPA and a life-long aversion to banana-flavoured baked goods.

SUB

The only place on campus where you can come to study anytime of the day or night, SUB is open 24 hours for your academic achievement. However, when the coffee buzz wears off at 12:30am and Java Jive is closed, you may be tempted to head to the seventh floor and indulge in "just one beer," which can easily turn into a full-fledged binge where you and fellow slackers (who have already given up hope) congregate to drown away their sorrow. Do you really want to be the one gagging on the smell of your own vomit-breath on exam day, as other students glare at you for stinking up the room as the smell of liquor oozes out of your pores? I didn't think so.

When all is said and done, and you've gone through the process of gathering your textbooks, stockpiling your caffeine supplies and travelling to your preferred studying location (see "Dos and Don'ts" section), you might find that you've only got a few hours left to actually do the studying. Now is time to employ a few shortcuts.

Take reading, for instance. Most of the words on a page are simply filler; they're un-important and don't really provide any actual information. (This page, for example, has very little in the way of useful information.) So, if it takes two minutes for you to read an entire page of text, how long would it take you to read every second word on that page? (Hint: Half as long.) In

fact, why stop at every second word—why not read only every fourth word, which would cut your studying time down to a quarter, while retaining all the important information.

For example, your textbook on psychology may say:

"As the age of a parent increases, and it nears the end of its reproductive life, so its chances of producing any more offspring reduce and the costs to itself of giving care to existing offspring decrease. It should follow that older parents are more willing to invest in the young than are younger ones."

Yikes, what a waste of time. Instead, it becomes so much clearer and more efficient if you were to read only every fourth word, where you would get:

"As a, it of, so producing reduce to care decrease. That more in are."

As you can see, all the filler has been eliminated while retaining the important information. Anyone can take a quick look at this sentence and determine that something is "producing" something. That production seems to be decreasing, for some reason. A reason that probably has some thing to do with "that more" being "in are."

If the task of reading a quarter of the words on the page seems too exacting, the summary sheet that many textbooks contain at the end of each chapter is a treasure trove. These short notes give a boiled-down foundation of the important material, while cutting out all of the troublesome examples, statistics and reasoned arguments that professors keep telling you are required for a "full understanding" of the material. If they can't boil it down to one sentence, it isn't important. Two at the most, if it's really complicated.

And there you have it. A complete guide to cramming. If this seems somewhat lacking in substance, it's probably because I left a few words out.

General Dos and Don'ts for a successful cramming session

Do: Take frequent breaks while you're studying. Ten minutes for every hour spent studying is suggested. It will help you keep your focus and it might just be what you need to make the option of suicide seem less attractive.

Don't: Shower. Not only will showering, dressing and other acts of cleanliness eat up precious minutes of time you could be using for panicked study, but not maintaining even the basic standards of hygiene that separate us from beasts will make people less likely to invite you out or wish to come visit you. And no social life means more time for studying. Lonely, lonely studying.

Do: Keep an eye on the bright side of things. The only thing worse than studying for a final is studying while depressed. A good mood will enable you to focus on your material better. Even if you don't do well on this exam, you have options. There's always community college, where you could learn the skills needed to join the work force as a plumber's assistant, or the temporary deputy-assistant manager of Boston Pizza. Or gas jockey! Doesn't that sound exciting? Basically, it's important to remember that if you fail out, it's not the end of the world—it's simply the end of yours.

Don't: Travel. Do your best to avoid moving anywhere and, if you must go somewhere, do so as slowly as possible. This might seem to be counterintuitive, but the answer in fact comes from the realm of science. Einstein theorized that as one approaches the speed of light, time slows down relative to others. In fact, he believed that if one reaches the speed of light, time would stop completely. So, the faster you are moving, the less you are getting done compared to others. Make every one of those nanoseconds count. Specially trained slacker scientists have been studying this effect for a few years now but, not-surprisingly, little progress has been made.

